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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: FISH, SEALS DYING IN CASPIAN

¶1. Summary: In the past several months, thousands of dead sturgeon and seals have washed up on the Kazakhstani shore of the Caspian Sea. Initial indications are that the deaths were likely linked to energy development activities. The associated ecological and economic damage has prompted a flurry of Kazakhstani interest in protecting Caspian marine wildlife stocks by, among other things, securing abandoned oil wells in and around the sea. The investigation to determine the exact cause of death of these animals is ongoing. End summary.

Dead Seals and Sturgeon Wash Up on Caspian Shore

¶2. While flying over the Severnoye Buzachy peninsula on April 29, regional government officials in western Kazakhstan spotted a large number of dead sturgeon and seals near the Kalamkas oil field. All told, about 800 sturgeon and 72 seal carcasses had washed ashore. While the dead animals were found in the vicinity of the Kalamkas oil field, none were seen on the territory of the oil field itself.

¶3. The carcasses were destroyed on the spot, preventing a full analysis of how the animals had died. Experts initially suggested that the cause of death might be disease, natural causes (the fish could have frozen under the ice), poachers' nets, exploratory drilling, or hydrogen sulphide. However, increasing numbers of sturgeon and seals began to wash up on the shore. By mid-May, the number of dead sturgeon and seals had reached 4000 and 600, respectively.

Abandoned Oil Wells a Threat

¶4. Also in mid-May, ecologists discovered an oil spill 10 km long and 2 km wide around an abandoned oil well at the Pribrezhnoye oil field. They noted that this spill could have poisoned the surrounding water and resulted in the deaths of those animals that had washed up on shore. AtyrayMunaiGasGeologia was sent to clean up the accident, and on May 23 reported that it had sealed the well with a temporary plug.

¶5. While this particular incident has been temporarily resolved, the risk to Caspian marine wildlife remains high. According to the Chief of the Atyrau Territorial Board for Environmental Protection, Marat Abdrahman, there are 1500 sealed oil wells in the Kazakhstani part of the Caspian Sea. These wells, which include 140-150 underwater wells, were sealed after prospectors determined that the sites lacked sufficient economic potential. The method used to seal

them, however, was not designed for long-term underwater use, and they now pose an ecological threat.

GOK Response

¶16. With economic damages associated with the loss of marine wildlife reaching upwards of 200 million tenge (\$1.7 million) the GOK enacted new measures to discover and counteract the causes behind the ecological damage. Biological samples were sent to a laboratory for analysis. Additionally, a special commission headed by the regional Akim (governor) was set up and a team of experts was sent to the disaster site. Kazakhstan invited Russian scientists to participate in the team. The government also decided to initiate criminal proceedings under Article 289 of the Criminal Code of the RK "Violation of Rules of Wild Life Protection."

¶17. The GOK already has taken certain measures to prevent such accidents. Since 2004, the GOK has allocated funds to properly attend to abandoned wells. However, it is apparent that these measures are not sufficient to address the problem. Shalbay Kulmakhanov, the Minister for Emergency Situations, has noted that there is lack of skilled personnel in the republic to carry out the necessary work. As a result, last year Kazakhstan managed to find and plug only two abandoned oil wells. The Minister proposes to set up an Emergency Response Team to eliminate accidents in the Caspian Sea. His plan would require 5.4 billion tenge (\$46 million).

¶18. Additional proposals have come from other Kazakhstani officials. At an international conference on "Ecological

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and Economic Problems Regarding Caspian Shelf Development," Gulmira Ismaiyllova, an official in Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education and Science, called for the creation of a rapid response system for oil spills in the Caspian Sea. She proposed that the system be placed under the authority of the Ministry of Emergency Situations.

¶19. The Minister of Environment, Nurlan Iskakov, has stated that he believes it is necessary to toughen requirements for users of natural resources. At the May 17 UNESCO regional conference on renewable energy, he said that in the future, users of natural resources would only get licenses if they were able to increase their operational efficiency by avoiding gas flaring. Currently, companies are only using about 15% of the associated gas, with the rest being flared or reinjected. The Minister also spoke in favor of prohibiting the disposal of waste on the sea floor.

¶10. Oleg Egorov, a senior research assistant in the Institute of Economy, a division of the Ministry of Education and Science, opined that it is necessary to sign a convention on the Caspian Sea. However, he believed that differences among littoral states on how to share the sea floor and surface area would make an agreement unlikely.

Sturgeon Threatened

¶11. At a time when the United Nations is working to save the sturgeon population in the Caspian sea (having recently extended the export ban on caviar from Central Asian states), the sturgeon population is dwindling. Considering the fact that Central Asian states export 95% of black caviar to the world market, if such ecological damage in the Caspian continues, the impact will be severe. The catch of sturgeon in the Caspian is already at historic lows. According to the RBK news agency, intensive oil development and poaching has decreased the annual catch of sturgeon in

the Ural-Caspian basin by 95% in the past thirty years.

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